

NOREF Policy Brief

Coping with a failing Pakistan

Stephen P. Cohen

Executive summary

As a state and a nation Pakistan has been in trouble for many years, but both now seem to be in a downward spiral. As a recent Brookings study observed, it is very difficult to predict Pakistan's short-term future, or the impact on its neighbours, let alone the wider international community. Pakistan's nuclear arsenal, its history of irresponsible behaviour as a nuclear proliferator, the close ties between radical Islamists and Pakistan, and its continuing hostile relations with India and Afghanistan all complicate efforts to look ahead even five years, let alone to speculate about effective policies.

The present policy of focusing on internal stability while encouraging Pakistani cooperation on Afghanistan and good relations with India is probably optimal, although it is unlikely alone to bring about

Pakistan's domestic transformation. These policies will not succeed unless Pakistanis, notably in the army, soon come to terms with their decaying state, rising radicalism, feeble economy and a waning spirit of national identity.

Outsiders can point out the dangers and provide economic and even military assistance that will help on the margins, but the battle for Pakistan will be won – or lost – by Pakistanis themselves. Some proposed policies are irresponsible and others are self-defeating or impractical. Yet, a crisis precipitated by Pakistani behaviour, notably a terrorist attack that originated in Pakistan – whether it was deliberate or not, may force more proactive policies. Chief among these would be increased pressure on Pakistan, or even a containment strategy.

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Pakistan's decline

States are glorified bureaucracies, nations are ideas that are more or less viable. In the 1970s Pakistan was on the edge of middle-income status and it was widely regarded as one of the more politically and socially advanced Muslim states. However, Pakistan's obsession with India, game-playing with nuclear weapons, and the narrow vision of most Pakistani politicians, as well as short-sighted United States policy, wore down the liberal consensus. With the rise of new Islamist sentiments – especially after the Iranian revolution – Pakistan was on a dangerous path. Both the idea and state of Pakistan are widely, if belatedly, regarded as being in deep trouble.

The relevant policy question is whether the “new normal” of a chaotic Pakistan is sustainable. If not, will Pakistan collapse suddenly, as did the Shah's regime in Iran, or will it succumb to revolution, like the Russian empire? Or will it gradually disintegrate, shedding its character as a moderate Muslim state, losing control over more and more territory? The country is in the metaphorical position of someone who has swallowed poison, sits on a keg of dynamite, is being shot at, all while an earthquake is rumbling through the neighbourhood. Which threat does it address first, or does it just hope for the best and try to carry on? Pessimism is in order, but is the glass half full or half empty?

These are the questions raised and discussed in a Brookings project that looked at Pakistan's future over the next five to seven years.¹ A team of 14 experts analysed a number of critical factors, or variables, some immediate, some long-term. Which can bring Pakistan down? What will Pakistan's future look like in the medium term and by 2017? The consensus of this project was that any or all of these factors *could* lead to the transformation of Pakistan, but that five or six of them were of critical importance. Fixing one of these alone would not be sufficient to make Pakistan a normal state, and dealing with most of them would be necessary sooner or later.

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Causes for concern

The papers commissioned for the project identified over a dozen factors, some long-term, some short-term. In summary, the participants observed that Pakistan's economy had to improve to generate revenue for a weakened educational system, and economic growth would eventually influence Pakistan's demographic time bomb. The competence of the Pakistani state was much reduced, even as people demanded more from their government, and the very idea of Pakistan as a nation was therefore in question. It could be that while nationalist feelings have intensified among the Pakistani elite, the quality and coherence of the Pakistani nation has gone into decline, even as sub-nationalisms have increased.

One of the main concerns identified by the research was political instability. New media – notably the nearly eighty television channels and wider access to the web and electronic sources of information – has transformed the political and social landscape in Pakistan, but has also been used brilliantly by radical Islamic groups to undermine the government. The Pakistani military also remains at the centre of all political calculations, unable to govern Pakistan by itself but unwilling to let others run the country. Pakistani politicians remain fractious. However, a new spirit of collaboration has now set in. This is partly because many leaders understand how grave the situation is and, partly because when only coalition governments can hold on to power, they are required to cooperate.

Another concern identified was Pakistan's deteriorating relations with almost all other states. Pakistan's relations with Kabul are bad, those with India even worse after the Mumbai terror attacks of 2008, and both show few signs of improvement. The India relationship was regarded as particularly important by several participants, as it shaped the attitudes of the Pakistani army, which in turn steered Pakistan. However, the US remains the most disliked country among Pakistanis, even more unpopular than India. Only China remains a staunch ally and friend of Pakistan, but along with this also comes greater Pakistani dependence on Beijing for economic investment, military equipment and political support.

¹ Stephen P. Cohen, ed, *Pakistan's Future: The Bellagio Papers*, Washington DC, Brookings Institution, September 2010, http://www.brookings.edu/papers/2010/09_bellagio_conference_papers.aspx, accessed 23 January 2011.

Separatism and sectarianism

Finally, the twin monsters of separatism and sectarianism remain active. The less-populous provinces of Baluchistan, Sindh and the former Northwest Frontier Province (newly-named Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa, or K-P), all had separatist elements, while the dominant province, Punjab, was infected with sectarian violence. Karachi, the largest and most important city in a country that is undergoing rapid urbanisation, is bitterly divided by ethnic differences, with Sindhis, Mohajirs (the descendants of migrants from India) and Pashtuns (themselves migrants from K-P), all locked in deadly urban combat. Pakistan's social order is changing faster than scholars can write about it, one frightening development being the rise of what Joshua White has called "vigilante Islam," which has no roots in orthodox Islamic thought and theory

Taking a wider perspective, the country has suffered from the negative consequences of globalisation and is notably part of a worldwide nuclear proliferation ring. It is also prominent in the transnational jihadi movement, for which Pakistan serves as a recruiting and training ground for local and foreign terrorists. On the other hand, it does not benefit from globalisation's positive impact – enhanced tourism, globally-oriented commerce, or a new openness to outside ideas and trends.

Not all participants stressed all of these factors equally, and some were viewed as more pressing than others, but by and large the group's optimism about Pakistan's future was guarded. In the opinion of one member, the metaphorical glass may be too big: given Pakistan's weak institutions and economy, Pakistan was trying to do too much, and it had to tailor its ambitions to fit its resources.

Warning signs

The workshop noted many warning signs, with at least seven critical ones:

Unwillingness to deal honestly with economic issues

Pakistan has fantasised over its economic prospects for years, ranging from over-optimistic projections to blaming others for its economic shortcomings. But the Pakistani establishment is unwilling to tax

the rich, let alone use state money to educate its people. Pakistan is spending too much on defence and security: it must cut its commitments to the military in the short term so it can grow in the long term. Economic growth is also the only way to address dangerous demographic trends, which in the long run will make Pakistan ungovernable and, for some, unliveable.

Inability to rebuild state institutions

Pakistan's government establishment, whether in education, local administration, the police, or the higher bureaucracy, may be damaged beyond the point of no return, but their ills are not esoteric. Pakistan needs help from the international community for a massive organisational rebuilding process, and for a concerted effort to combat corruption in the system and instigation of accountability measures. Private organisations and NGOs are not a substitute.

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The devolution of power to the provinces – what would paradoxically be a wise step under other circumstances – may be another misstep, as most of the provinces lack the kind of organisational integrity that would permit them to take on a new administrative burden.

A more recessed role for the military

The Pakistani army will have to allow civilian competence to develop. This requires, on the one hand, the army's willingness to adopt a diminished political role and, on the other, the rise of demonstrably effective civilians. The army does not regard the government headed by President Asif Zardari as competent: in 2009 it forced the government to restore to office Chief Justice Iftikhar Chaudhry; vetoed the trip of the intelligence chief to India (a trip that was promised publicly by Zardari); and was behind a campaign to discredit the US Kerry-Lugar Bill intended to strengthen Pakistani civil society. The army also vetoed Zardari's plans to reduce its nuclear-alert status, intended as a goodwill gesture to India.

Senior army officers understand perfectly well that their domestic dilemma is as acute as their foreign policy one: they must encourage civilian competence, but this involves risk-taking that they seem unwilling to accept. At the back of their minds is the fear that civilians do not appreciate the mortal threat that India poses to Pakistan, and the generals simply do not accept the argument that people-to-people relations, or increased trade, will alleviate the India problem. They still see India behind every threat, imagined or real, at home or in Afghanistan, and encourage a clique of shrill anti-US and anti-West publicists, journalists and politicians, collectively known as the *ghairiyaat*, that opposes every effort to normalise relations with India.

Absence of governance at the top

In all of its recent crises, whether external or internal, the government has demonstrated extraordinary confusion at the top, even though it is probably the best civilian government Pakistan has ever had. The

A dangerous policy vacuum exists in Pakistan.

Zardari government, sometimes supported by opposition parties, has tried to roll back the most oppressive and extreme legislation passed by previous military and civilian governments. Zardari's team, while learning on the job,

is more or less realistic about its ambitions and goals, unlike the former president, General Pervez Musharraf, who while in power exaggerated what could be done and, later on, what he had done.

The reasons for failure are easy to see: there was and is no coherent system of presenting alternative policies before the government, no perspective planning, and no effective mechanism for coordinating the actions of different parts of the government. These are all procedures that are familiar to the army, but since it lacks the breadth of vision and expertise to formulate broad strategies on any but military issues, a dangerous policy vacuum exists in Pakistan. The vacuum was evident when the Zardari government tried to bring the intelligence services under a civilian authority (the Home Minister) and was rebuffed by the generals, who regard intelligence as their sole preserve.

Uneasy relations with external supporters

Pakistan has fallen into a position of deep dependency vis-à-vis donors, and the government is rightly criticised for giving in to them time after time, whether they are individual states or international lending agencies. Pakistan needs to change this relationship in order to protect its dignity and sovereignty. Pakistan must develop the scope and criteria of assistance programmes and gain the support of donors. The conditionality should come from the Pakistani side, with the acknowledgement that if Pakistan fails to meet conditions, the aid or support will be correspondingly reduced. The government should seek help from other competent governments to improve its budget and planning cycle, and from the private sector as well, where there is a great deal of talent. "Tough love" is a suitable standard and Pakistanis themselves should insist on it.

More crises with India

A normal relationship with India is a necessary condition for Pakistan to avoid further deterioration. Although India does not want to see an assertive Pakistan, a failing Pakistan has the capacity to damage India considerably, and the nuclearisation of their 60-year-long war makes the stakes even higher. Further crises, deliberate or inadvertent, will distract Pakistan from the rebuilding priority, endangering both India and itself.

Drawing on conversations with civilian and military leaders in Pakistan and India over an eight-week period, it is clear that the conditions for a normal relationship do not exist. Like the Israeli-Palestinian dispute, there are groups, mostly in Pakistan, but some in India too, which are willing to use force or terrorism to ensure that normalisation between moderates in both countries will not take place. Thus, as in the Middle East, the formula for a perpetual conflict is in place in South Asia. Ironically, the existence of nuclear weapons in both countries – their stocks are now estimated at nearly a hundred warheads each – ensures that a major war between the two countries is unlikely, but nuclear weapons do nothing to provide the incentive for strategic, political or economic normalisation.

Further appeasement of Islamists

Pakistan is becoming polarised, with liberal elements of its once vibrant middle class on the defensive. The global dialogue on reforming Islam has a Pakistani dimension, but much ground has been conceded to doctrinaire Islamists who receive considerable state patronage. These have expanded their influence, sometimes by bomb and gun, in Pakistan's debates on the social, cultural and legal fronts. This is an alarming trend. Pakistan has already changed markedly, and the problem is not just the rise of intolerant and vigilante Islamists, but the weakness of modern Islamisers and the tiny pro-Western elite. These have contributed to Pakistan becoming one of the centres of global jihad.

Somewhere between hope and despair

Some members of this project were very pessimistic about Pakistan's future, and foresaw even greater calamities ahead. Certainly, a few bad developments could push Pakistan over the edge at any time. These include a new crisis with India, a successful separatist movement and rising terrorism. One event that the group did not foresee was the massive flooding that submerged a good portion of Pakistan for several months from July 2010 onward. This was the result of both a freak weather event (heavy rains fell on the western but not the eastern portions of Pakistan's river system), plus 40 years of neglect of the drainage and water management system by both military and civilian regimes. The consequences of these floods are still being debated, but they did not produce the kind of national rally that some hoped for and they are more likely to turn out to be a negative "Black Swan" event.²

However, two factors give hope – with the caveat that hope is not a policy. First, there is no question that Pakistan has the human capital to reverse its direction. Its tiny elite is competent, and there is a middle class that still wants reform. Pakistan needs to experiment with democracy; it cannot be run as an autocracy, whether by the military or a civilian leadership, no matter how charismatic he (or she) might be.

Second, it is now in the interest of the international community that Pakistan succeed – or at least not fail badly. No country, not even India, wants to see Pakistan come apart violently, as real failure could spew nuclear weapons and terror groups around the world. This is why the option proposed by Ralph Peters and a few others – to break up Pakistan – is both impractical and dangerous.

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Western policy v Chinese strategy

The Western powers, Japan and India need to have a concerted policy, one that would strengthen reform and democratic forces in Pakistan, encourage the military to adopt a recessed role, and help Pakistan improve its economy and generate more resources to address vital domestic needs. Yet China, Pakistan's closest ally, is no supporter of the democratisation process for Pakistan, favouring harsh measures to control terrorist and extremist groups. The parallels with North Korea are striking: by supporting these states, China keeps regional rivals off-balance, while it pursues its narrow economic and strategic goals.

Right now, as far as the West and Japan are concerned, the primary policy regarding Pakistan has three components. The first is to look the other way, even if Islamabad is supportive of the Afghan Taliban. The working assumption seems to be that Pakistan's role is not determinative in the conflict in Afghanistan, and that Pakistan must participate in reaching a settlement there. A second component of this policy is support for Pakistan in the battle against its own Taliban, especially after the army recognised the consequences for Pakistan of blowback from the Afghan conflict. The third element is massive and unprecedented economic aid, particularly in the form of the Kerry-Lugar Bill.

Recent conversations with army leaders and others indicate that they now understand the need to rebuild Pakistan's civil institutions, although they are not sure how to do it. The assumption of Kerry-Lugar is that a failed Pakistan would be calamitous for the US, given its size, its location and, above

² Stephen P. Cohen, "Lessons from Pakistan's Latest Catastrophe", Brookings Blog comment, 17 August 2010, http://www.brookings.edu/opinions/2010/0817_pakistan_floods_cohen.aspx, accessed 3 December 2010.

all, its nuclear weapons. This is Pakistan as another North Korea: too nuclear to fail. Few, however, have advocated the kind of massive nation-building programme for Pakistan recommended by the US columnist David Ignatius.

India as a strategic partner

There are two alternative and quite different policies that share the most pessimistic assumptions about Pakistan. If one assumes that Pakistan might fail, or will be weak and unstable, then it makes sense to encourage India to balance Pakistan. Such a policy would have India provide an alternative land route to Afghanistan, demonstrating to Islamabad that threats to cut off the supply lines can be circumvented. An expansion of this policy would be former US ambassador to India Robert Blackwill's proposal to accept the partition of Afghanistan, throwing US weight behind a northern Alliance/India group to counter the Pakistan-supported Taliban in southern Afghanistan. The problem with using India to pressure Pakistan is that it provides negative incentives for the army to undertake a programme of domestic reform, and it certainly would heighten India-Pakistan tensions.

If one assumes, however, that Pakistan is not merely a state in trouble but that it is becoming a rogue state, then a balancing policy could be easily transformed into one of containment, which would mark the failure of western policy towards Pakistan over the last sixty years. If it is clear that present policies are not working, that aid packages will not have much of an impact, and that Pakistani nationalism trumps Pakistani national interest, Pakistan may be seen as a threat, not an asset. This would be confirmed should there be a successful terrorist attack originating in Pakistan, mounted against India or a Western country, say a successful Times Square bombing that killed many Americans.

In this case it is likely that the West would reassess its relationship with Pakistan. In such a reassessment, India's role would be to contain a dangerous Pakistan and might lead to a policy that placed India at the centre of South Asia's geo-strategic calculations, with the West working in partnership with New

Delhi, "fixing" Afghanistan and Pakistan once and for all. This puts the US on the side of a rising power, although Indians are deeply ambivalent about such a regional role, and there is no reason to believe that India – alone or with other states – can contain a truly disruptive Pakistan.

"Cut and run" or intervention?

Looking down the road five or six years, if one combines Pakistani deterioration with the Indian propensity for restraint, the US and its allies might pursue "offshore balancing", an academic/diplomatic euphemism for cut and run. The columnist Tom Friedman says that regions such as the Middle East and South Asia eventually work out their difficulties without US intervention. With increasingly scarce resources and unhappy domestic opinion to contend with, the US and its allies may well decide that the South Asian states can manage their affairs reasonably well; all we would need to do is to step in every ten years to prevent a nuclear war.

Two other policies need to be mentioned, although each has serious drawbacks. Steve Coll has forwarded the view that Kashmir is at the root of Indian-Pakistani differences, and if outside powers worked to facilitate a settlement, then the risks of war would be lowered and, inferentially, Pakistan could devote its energies to reconstruction and rebuilding. Outside intervention, of course, would be opposed tooth and nail by India, but might be workable if it leads to a settlement of the Kashmir dispute – which Coll believes was almost achieved in 2007 during the "back channel" talks. Were Pakistan to normalise its relations with India, then cooperation might be extended across the board, restoring the strategic unity of the subcontinent that was lost in the 1947 partition.

However, besides Indian reluctance to compromise with a failing Pakistan, China would have every reason to oppose normalisation, and it could probably offer Pakistan more *not to settle* than India could offer Pakistan to settle. Twenty-five years ago, before it went nuclear, Pakistan offered to abandon its nuclear programme if the US were to provide a

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security guarantee that included protection in case of an attack from India. The request was spurned, Pakistan went ahead with a nuclear programme and has now become even more dependent on China. The prospects of restoring South Asia's strategic unity are low to zero given China's new influence and India's ambivalence over normalisation with Pakistan.

So it's back to the current – perhaps the least worst – cluster of policies. Politics is an experimental, not a theoretical science; we must see how this experiment plays out over the next two years, but let us also be prepared to think of major changes in policy.

Further Reading

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